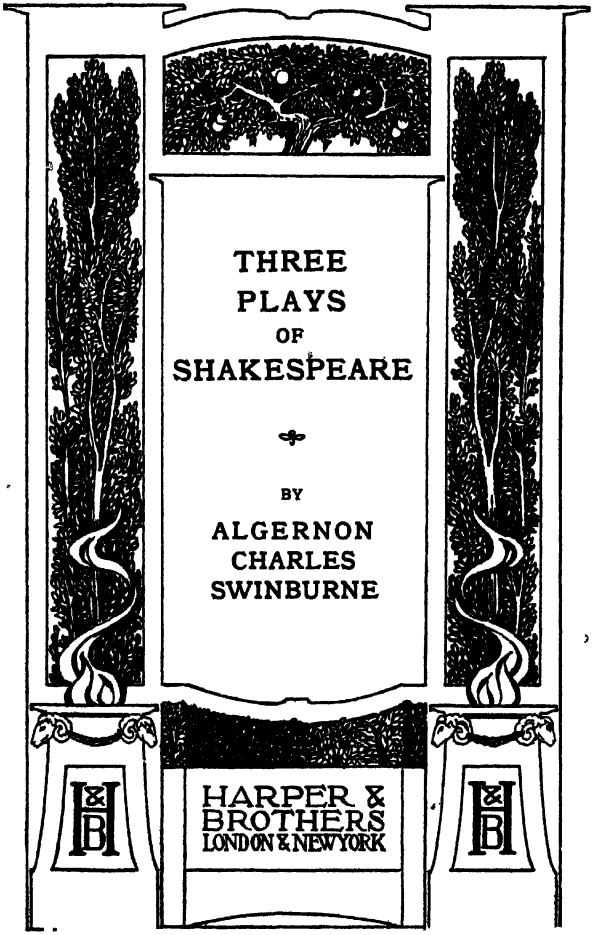
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THREE PLAYS OF SHAKESPEARE

BY

ALGERNON CHARLES SWINBURNE

HARPER & BROTHERS
LONDON & NEW YORK

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OF
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PUBLISHERS' PREFACE

HARPER'S Library of Living Thought is intended as a response to what appears to be the special demand of the century now opening. Just as in the organic world every organism is, we are told, a growth of cells springing from the parent cell, so every good book is nothing more than a synthetic expansion of a single, central, living thought. Bacon's entire system of philosophy is nothing more than a development of one great thought: "We conquer nature by obeying her." Again, before Darwin and Wallace simultaneously announced a new cosmogony of growth, the living thought at the heart of that great revolutionary system was expressed in a footnote to an article in the "West-

minster Review" by Herbert Spencer. That brief footnote was of more importance to the world than most of the books published in that year. The twentieth century is and must needs be in a hurry, and what it asks for is the central living thought of every intellectual movement without delay. Its energies are so enormously active that new living thoughts are jostling each other daily. The consequence is that when a writer feels that he has a new living thought to express, he does not wait to develop it fully—he does not pause to write a book, as he would have done in times past—he sends the suggestive article to one of the great reviews or magazines. Before getting into permanent form, this suggestive article has to wait until the creator of the thought has the opportunity of developing it, of expanding it into a book, or else until he

republishes it in a collection of miscellaneous essays upon all kinds of other subjects. This is why it is no uncommon thing to see in the careful student's library single numbers of a review, or magazine, preserved; while in libraries of other careful students we see a single article cut out of a review and made by the binder into a queer-looking little volume. Now, it is our purpose to furnish such students as these with the living central thought in permanent book form as soon as it is born, and at a low price. The student will find that for the same price which he would give for the review containing the one desired article he can obtain a beautifully printed little volume, well bound, and an ornament to his library.

Having explained the *raison d'être* of the series, we have now only a word or two to say upon the eminent

writers whom we have invited to further our views — Mr. Algernon Charles Swinburne, Count Leo Tolstoy, and Professor William Flinders Petrie. As regards the first of these writers and the subject upon which he has chosen to write, it will be conceded that there is no literary question in which the twentieth century is more deeply concerning itself than that of Shakespeare and his art. And it will be conceded that the foremost living poet of the world, who is also acknowledged to be the greatest Shakespearean student, is, above all men, adequately equipped for treating such a subject. The "Three Plays of Shakespeare" upon which he discourses are "King Lear," "Othello," and "King Richard II." In the first he has given us a new living thought indeed—the thought that King Lear is an expression of the most advanced

doctrine as to the absolute equality of man confronted by nature, and of the futility of the monarchical idea, which was never more rampant than in the age in which Shakespeare lived. In the second, in comparing and contrasting Shakespeare's treatment of the jealousy of Othello with the treatment of the same passion in the novel upon which it is based—the seventh story of the third decade of the Hecatommithi of M. Giovanbattista Giraldi Cinthio—he has been equally bold. He has shown that, while the great dramatist has undoubtedly transfigured the story to the most pathetic of tragedies, he has in one case—that of Iago's stealing of the handkerchief—missed the most pathetic feature of the "tragic mischief." In "King Richard II" he for the first time shows the struggle in the mind of Shakespeare between the influence of Marlowe and

the influence of Robert Greene. A more interesting analysis of Shakespeare's dramatic, as well as metrical, art has never been given to the world.

By comparing Mr. Swinburne's volume with that of Professor Petrie, it will be observed that it does not reach the average length of the books in this series. But we feel sure that the reader will think it of no less value and of no less importance on account of its brevity.

With regard to Count Tolstoy's contribution, at this moment a great and passionate attention is being given to religious questions. "New theologies" are springing up like mushrooms. The character of the teachings of Christ is being discussed with an absolute freedom such as was not possible in previous times. There is no more commanding figure in the realm of religious thought to-day than Count Tolstoy.

He impresses the modern imagination with the majesty of a prophet. By the suffrages of the Christian world he would be the one above all others chosen to tell once more the old, old story. He has done this with the eloquence of grand simplicity in "The Teaching of Jesus." It is based, as he tells us in his preface, on talks to the children of the village near his home. All "who become as little children" before the great mysteries must feel its power.

Professor William Flinders Petrie, the eminent Egyptologist and philosopher, contributes a remarkable volume on "Personal Religion in Egypt before Christianity." It is an examination of the "old bottles into which the new wine was poured" that he gives the reader with all the resources of his unrivalled knowledge of that important epoch.

These volumes are the precursors of volumes of a like vital character.

A volume entitled "Poetic Adequacy in the Twentieth Century" will be contributed by Mr. Theodore Watts-Dunton, who stands in the foremost line of great English critics by right of subtle and profound insight, which is his, perhaps, because he is himself a creator.

Science will naturally claim special attention in the Library of Living Thought. Among the early volumes in this department Professor Svante Arrhenius, the distinguished Swedish savant, has written a deeply interesting account of the conceptions which man has formed from the earliest to the latest times of the origin and formation of the universe. No more important contribution to the expounding of the problem of the universe has been made than his own previous work, "Worlds in the Making."

February, 1909.

KING LEAR

KING LEAR

IF nothing were left of Shakespeare but the single tragedy of *King Lear*, it would still be as plain as it is now that he was the greatest man that ever lived. As a poet, the author of this play can only be compared with Æschylus: the Hebrew prophets and the creator of Job are sometimes as sublime in imagination and in passion, but always quite incomparably inferior in imaginative intelligence. Sophocles is as noble, as beautiful, and as kindly a thinker and a writer: but the gentle Shakespeare could see farther and higher and wider and deeper at a glance than ever could the gentle Sophocles. Aristophanes had as magnificent a

power of infinitely joyous wit and infinitely inexhaustible humour: but whom can he show us or offer us to be set against Falstaff or the Fool? It is true that Shakespeare has neither the lyric nor the prophetic power of the Greeks and the Hebrews: but then it must be observed and remembered that he, and he alone among poets and among men, could well afford to dispense even with such transcendent gifts as these. Freedom of thought and sublimity of utterance came hand in hand together into English speech: our first great poet, if loftiness and splendour of spirit and of word be taken as the test of greatness, was Christopher Marlowe. From his dead hand the one man born to excel him, and to pay a due and a deathless tribute to his deathless memory, took

up the heritage of dauntless thought, of daring imagination, and of since unequalled song.

The tragedy of *King Lear*, like the trilogy of the Oresteia, is a thing incomparable and unique. To compare it with *Othello* is as inevitable a temptation as to compare the *Agamemnon* with the *Prometheus* of the one man comparable with Shakespeare. And the result, for any reader of human intelligence and decent humility in sight of what is highest in the spiritual world, must always be a sense of adoring doubt and exulting hesitation. In *Othello* and in *Prometheus* a single figure, an everlasting and godlike type of heroic and human agony, dominates and dwarfs all others but those of the traitor Iago and the tyrant God. There is no Clytæm-

nestra in the one, and there is no Cordelia in the other. "The gentle lady married to the Moor" is too gentle for comparison with the most glorious type of womanhood which even Shakespeare ever created before he conceived and brought forth Imogen. No one could have offered to Cordelia the tribute of so equivocal a compliment as was provoked by the submissive endurance of Desdemona—"Truly, an obedient lady." Antigone herself—and with Antigone alone can we imagine the meeting of Cordelia in the heaven of heavens—is not so divinely human as Cordelia. We love her all the more, with a love that at once tempers and heightens our worship, for the rough and abrupt repetition of her nobly unmerciful reply to her father's fond and fatuous appeal.

Almost cruel and assuredly severe in its uncompromising self-respect, this brief and natural word of indignantly reticent response is the key-note of all that follows—the spark which kindles into eternal life the most tragic of all tragedies in the world. All the yet unimaginable horror of the future becomes at once inevitable and assured when she shows herself so young and so untender—so young and true. And what is the hereditary horror of doom once imminent over the house of Atreus to this instant imminence of no supernatural but a more awfully natural fate? Cursed and cast out, she leaves him and knows that she leaves him in the hands of Goneril and Regan.

Coleridge, the greatest though not the first great critic and apostle or

interpreter of Shakespeare, has noted "these daughters and these sisters" as the only characters in Shakespeare whose wickedness is ultranatural—something outside and beyond the presumable limits of human evil. It would be well for human nature if it were so; but is it? They are "remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, kindless"; hot and hard, cold and cunning, savage and subtle as a beast of the field or the wilderness or the jungle. But such dangerous and vicious animals are not more exceptional than the very noblest and purest of their kind. An Iago is abnormal: his wonderful intelligence, omnipotent and infallible within its limit and its range, gives to the unclean and maleficent beast that he is the dignity and the mystery of a

devil. Goneril and Regan would be almost vulgarly commonplace by comparison with him if the conditions of their life and the circumstances of their story were not so much more extraordinary than their instincts and their acts. "Regan," according to Coleridge, "is not, in fact, a greater monster than Goneril, but she has the power of casting more venom." A champion who should wish to enter the lists on behalf of Goneril might plead that Regan was so much more of a Gadarean sow than her elder sister as to be, for all we know, incapable of such passion as flames out in Goneril at the thought of foreign banners spread in a noiseless land.

"Where's thy drum? France spreads his banners in our noiseless land;

With plumed helm thy slayer begins [his] threats;
Whiles thou, a moral fool, sit'st still, and criest
'Alack, why does he so?'"

Beast and she-devil as she is, she rises in that instant to the level of an unclean and a criminal Joan of Arc. Her advocate might also invoke as an extenuating circumstance the fact that she poisoned Regan.

François-Victor Hugo, the author of the best and fullest commentary ever written on the text of which he gave us the most wonderful and masterly of all imaginable translations, has perhaps unwittingly enforced and amplified the remark of Coleridge on the difference between the criminality of the one man chosen by chance and predestined by nature as the proper paramour of either sister and the monstrosity of the

creatures who felt towards him as women feel towards the men they love. Edmund is not a more true-born child of hell than a true-born son of his father. Goneril and Regan are legitimate daughters of the pit; the man who excites in them such emotion as in such as they are may pass as the substitute for love is but a half-blooded fellow from the infernal as well as the human point of view. His last wish is to undo the last and most monstrous of his crimes. Such a wish would have been impossible to either of the sisters by whom he can boast with his dying breath that Edmund was beloved.

"I pant for life: some good I mean to do,
Despite of mine own nature. Quickly send,
Be brief in it, to the castle; for my writ
Is on the life of Lear and on Cordelia:
Nay, send in time."

The incomparable genius of the greatest among all poets and all men approved itself incomparable for ever by the possibly unconscious instinct which in this supreme work induced or compelled him to set side by side the very lowest and the very highest types of imaginable humanity. Kent and Oswald, Regan and Cordelia, stand out in such relief against each other that Shakespeare alone could have wrought their several figures into one perfect scheme of spiritual harmony. Setting aside for a moment the reflection that outside the work of Æschylus there is no such poetry in the world, we must remember that there is no such realism. And there is no discord between the supreme sublimities of impassioned poetry and the humblest realities of photographic prose. In-

credible and impossible as it seems, the impression of the one is enhanced and intensified by the impression of the other.

That Shakespeare's judgment was as great and almost as wonderful as his genius has been a commonplace of criticism ever since the days of Coleridge; questionable only by such dirty and dwarfish creatures of simian intellect and facetious idiocy as mistake it for a sign of wit instead of dullness, and of distinction instead of degradation, to deny the sun in heaven and affirm the fragrance of a sewer. But I do not know whether his equally unequalled skill in the selection and composition of material for the construction of a masterpiece has or has not been as all but universally recognized. No more happy and no more

terrible inspiration ever glorified the genius of a poet than was that which bade the greatest of them all inweave or fuse together the legend of Lear and his daughters with the story of Gloucester and his sons. It is possible that an episode in Sidney's *Arcadia* may have suggested, as is usually supposed or usually repeated, the notion or conception of this more than tragic underplot; but the student will be disappointed who thinks to find in the sweet and sunbright work of Sidney's pure and happy genius a touch or a hint of such tragic horror as could only be conceived and made endurable by the deeper as well as higher, and darker as well as brighter, genius of Shakespeare. And this fearful understudy in terror is a necessary, an indispen-

sable, part of the most wonderful creation ever imagined and realized by man. The author of the Book of Job, the author of the Eumenides, can show nothing to be set beside the third act of *King Lear*. All that is best and all that is worst in man might have been brought together and flashed together upon the mind's eye of the spectator or the student without the intervention of such servile ministers as take part with Goneril and Regan against their father. Storm and lightning, thunder and rain, become to us, even as they became to Lear, no less conscious and responsible partners in the superhuman inhumanity of an unimaginable crime. The close of the *Prometheus* itself seems less spiritually and overpoweringly fearful by comparison with a

scene which is not the close and is less terrible than the close of *King Lear*. And it is no whit more terrible than it is beautiful. The splendour of the lightning and the menace of the thunder serve only or mainly to relieve or to enhance the effect of suffering and the potency of passion on the spirit and the conscience of a man. The sufferer is transfigured: but he is not transformed. Mad or sane, living and dying, he is passionate and vehement, single-hearted and self-willed. And therefore it is that the fierce appeal, the fiery protest against the social iniquities and the legal atrocities of civilized mankind, which none before the greatest of all Englishmen had ever dreamed of daring to utter in song or set forth upon the stage, comes not from Hamlet, but

from Lear. The young man whose infinite capacity of thought and whose delicate scrupulosity of conscience at once half disabled and half deified him could never have seen what was revealed by suffering to an old man who had never thought or felt more deeply or more keenly than an average labourer or an average king. Lear's madness, at all events, was assuredly not his enemy, but his friend.

The rule of Elizabeth and her successor may have been more arbitrary than we can now understand how the commonwealth of England could accept and could endure; but how far it was from a monarchy, from a government really deserving of that odious and ignominious name, we may judge by the fact that this play could be acted and published. Among all

its other great qualities, among all the many other attributes which mark it for ever as matchless among the works of man, it has this above all, that it is the first great utterance of a cry from the heights and the depths of the human spirit on behalf of the outcasts of the world—on behalf of the social sufferer, clean or unclean, innocent or criminal, thrall or free. To satisfy the sense of righteousness, the craving for justice, as unknown and unimaginable by Dante as by Chaucer, a change must come upon the social scheme of things which shall make an end of the actual relations between the judge and the cutpurse, the beadle and the prostitute, the beggar and the king. All this could be uttered, could be prophesied, could be thundered from the English stage at the dawn of the

seventeenth century. Were it within the power of omnipotence to create a German or a Russian Shakespeare, could anything of the sort be whispered or muttered or hinted or suggested from the boards of a Russian or a German theatre at the dawn of the twentieth? When a Tolstoi or a Sudermann can do this, and can do it with impunity in success, it will be allowed that his country is not more than three centuries behind England in civilization and freedom. Not political reform, but social revolution as beneficent and as bloodless, as absolute and as radical, as enkindled the aspiration and the faith of Victor Hugo, is the key-note of the creed and the watchword of the gospel according to Shakespeare. Not, of course, that it was not his first and

last aim to follow the impulse which urged him to do good work for its own sake and for love of his own art: but this he could not do without delivery of the word that was in him —the word of witness against wrong done by oversight as well as by cruelty, by negligence as surely as by crime. These things were hidden from the marvellous wisdom of Hamlet, and revealed to the more marvellous insanity of Lear.

There is nothing of the miraculous in this marvel: the mere presence and companionship of the Fool should suffice to account for it; Cordelia herself is but a little more adorably worthy of our love than the poor fellow who began to pine away after her going into France and before his coming into sight of reader or

spectator. Here again the utmost humiliation imaginable of social state and daily life serves only to exalt and to emphasize the nobility and the manhood of the natural man. The whip itself cannot degrade him; the threat of it cannot change his attitude towards Lear; the dread of it cannot modify his defiance of Goneril. Being, if not half-witted, not altogether as other men are, he urges Lear to return and ask his daughters' blessing rather than brave the midnight and the storm: but he cleaves to his master with the divine instinct of fidelity and love which is not, though it should be, as generally recognized in the actual nature of a cat as in the proverbial nature of a dog. And when the old man is trembling on the very verge of madness, he sees and

understands the priceless worth of such devotion and the godlike wisdom of such folly. In the most fearfully pathetic of all poems the most divinely pathetic touch of all is the tender thought of the houseless king for the suffering of such a fellow-sufferer as his fool. The whirlwind of terror and pity in which we are living as we read may at first confuse and obscure to the sight of a boyish reader the supreme significance and the unutterable charm of it. But if any elder does not feel it too keenly and too deeply for tears, it is a pity that he should waste his time and misuse his understanding in the study of Shakespeare.

There is nothing in all poetry so awful, so nearly unendurable by the reader who is compelled by a natural instinct of imagination to realize and

believe it, as the close of the *Choephoræ*, except only the close of *King Lear*. The cry of Ugolino to the earth that would not open to swallow and to save is not quite so fearful in its pathos. But the skill which made use of the stupid old chronicle or tradition to produce this final masterpiece of tragedy is coequal with the genius which created it. The legendary Cordelia hanged herself in prison, long after her father's death, when defeated in battle by the sons of Goneril. And this most putid and contemptible tradition suggested to Shakespeare the most dramatic and the most poetic of all scenes and all events that ever bade all men not devoid of understanding understand how much higher is the genius of man than the action of chance: how far

the truth of imagination exceeds and transcends at all points the accident of fact. That an event may have happened means nothing and matters nothing; that a man such as Æschylus or Shakespeare imagined it means this: that it endures and bears witness what man may be, at the highest of his powers and the noblest of his nature, for ever.

OTHELLO

OTHELLO

IN the seventh story of the third decade of the *Hecatommithi* of M. Giovanbattista Giraldi Cinthio, "nobile Ferrarese," first published in 1565, there is an incident so beautifully imagined and so beautifully related that it seems at first inexplicable how Shakespeare, when engaged in transfiguring this story into the tragedy of *Othello*, can have struck it out of his version. The loss of the magic handkerchief which seals the doom of the hero and his fellow-victim is far less plausibly and far less beautifully explained by a mere accident, and a most unlikely accident, than by a device which heightens at once the charm of Desdemona and the atrocity

of Iago. It is through her tenderness for his little child that he takes occasion to destroy her.

The ancient or ensign, who is nameless as every other actor in the story except the 'Moor's wife,[1] is of course, if compared with Iago, a mere shadow cast before it by the advent of that awful figure. But none the less is he the remarkably powerful and original creature of a true and tragic

[1] From her name of Disdemona, a curious corruption of the Greek word δυσδαίμων, Cinthio, with a curious anticipation of one of the finest and most delightful touches in one of the finest and most delightful characters ever created by the very genius of creative humour, deduces the Shandean moral that her father was the first person blameworthy, for having given her a name of unhappy augury. "And it was resolved among the company, that the name being the first gift that the father gives his son, he ought to bestow on him one both magnificent and fortunate, as though he wished thus to presage for him good and greatness."

genius. Every man may make for himself, and must allow that he cannot pretend to impose upon any other, his own image of the most wicked man ever created by the will of man or God. But Cinthio's villain is distinctly and vividly set before us: a man "of most beautiful presence, but of the wickedest nature that ever was man in the world." Less abnormal and less inhumanly intellectual than Iago, who loved Desdemona "not out of absolute lust" (perhaps the strangest and subtlest point of all that go to make up his all but inscrutable character), this simpler villain, "no whit heeding the faith given to his wife, nor friendship, nor faith, nor obligation, that he might have to the Moor, fell most ardently in love with Disdemona. And he set

all his thought to see if it might become possible for him to enjoy her."

This plain and natural motive would probably have sufficed for any of those great contemporaries who found it easier to excel all other tragic or comic poets since the passing of Sophocles and Aristophanes than to equal or draw near to Shakespeare. For him it was insufficient. Neither envy nor hatred nor jealousy nor resentment, all at work together in festering fusion of conscious and contemplative evil, can quite explain Iago even to himself: yet neither Macbeth nor even Hamlet is by nature more inevitably introspective. But the secret of the abyss of this man's nature lies deeper than did ever plummet sound save Shakespeare's. The

bright and restless devil of Goethe's invention, the mournfuller and more majestic devil created by Marlowe, are spirits of less deep damnation than that incarnate in the bluff plain-spoken soldier whose honesty is the one obvious thing about him, the one unmistakable quality which neither man nor woman ever fails to recognize and to trust.

And what is even the loftier Faust, whose one fitting mate was Helen, if compared with the subjects of Iago's fathomless and bottomless malice? This quarry cries on havoc louder than when Hamlet fell. Shakespeare alone could have afforded to cancel the most graceful touch, to efface the loveliest feature, in the sketch of Cinthio's heroine. But Desdemona can dispense with even this.

"The Moor's wife went often, as I have said, to the ancient's wife's house, and abode with her a good part of the day. Whence this man seeing that she sometimes bore about her a handkerchief which he knew that the Moor had given her, the which handkerchief was wrought in Moorish wise most subtly, and was most dear to the lady, and in like wise to the Moor, he bethought him to take it from her secretly, and thence to prepare against her her final ruin. And he having a girl of three years old, which child was much beloved of Disdemona, one day that the hapless lady had gone to stay at the house of this villain, he took the little girl in his arms and gave her to the lady, who took her and gathered her to her breast: this deceiver,

who was excellent at sleight of hand, reft from her girdlestead the handkerchief so cunningly that she was no whit aware of it, and departed from her right joyful. Disdemona, knowing not this, went home, and being busied with other thoughts took no heed of the handkerchief. But some days thence, seeking for it and not finding it, she was right fearful lest the Moor should ask it of her, as he was often wont to do."

No reader of this terribly beautiful passage can fail to ask himself why Shakespeare forbore to make use of it. The substituted incident is as much less probable as it is less tragic. The wife offers to bind the husband's aching forehead with this especially hallowed handkerchief: "he puts it from him, and it drops," unnoticed by

either, for Emilia to pick up and reflect, " I am glad I have found this napkin."

What can be the explanation of what a dunce who knows better than Shakespeare might call an oversight ? There is but one : but it is all-sufficient. In Shakespeare's world as in nature's it is impossible that monsters should propagate : that Iago should beget, or that Goneril or Regan should bring forth. Their children are creatures unimaginable by man. The old chronicles give sons to Goneril, who vanquish Cordelia in battle and drive her to suicide in prison : but Shakespeare knew that such a tradition was not less morally and physiologically incongruous than it was poetically and dramatically impossible. And Lear's daughters are not monsters

in the proper sense: their unnatural nature is but the sublimation and exaggeration of common evil qualities, unalloyed, untempered, unqualified by any ordinary admixture of anything not ravenously, resolutely, mercilessly selfish. They are devils only by dint of being more utterly and exclusively animals—and animals of a lower and hatefuller type—than usual. But any one less thoroughly intoxicated with the poisonous drug of lifelong power upon all others within reach of his royal hand would have been safe from the convincing and subjugating influence of Goneril and Regan. That is plain enough: but who will be fool enough to imagine that he would have been safe against the more deadly and inevitable influence of Iago?

The most fearful evidence of his

spiritual power—for it would have been easy for a more timid nature than his wife's to secure herself beforehand against his physical violence by a warning given betimes to either of his intended victims—was necessarily suppressed by Shakespeare as unfit for dramatic service. Emilia will not believe Othello's assurance of her husband's complicity in the murder of Desdemona: the ancient's wife in Cinthio's terrible story "knew all, seeing that her husband would fain have made use of her as an instrument in the lady's death, but she would never assent, and for dread of her husband durst not tell her anything." This is not more striking and satisfying in a tale than it would have been improper and ineffectual in a tragedy. So utter a prostration of

spirit, so helpless an abjection of soul and abdication of conscience under the absolute pressure of sheer terror, would have been too purely dreadful and contemptible a phase of debased nature for Shakespeare to exhibit and to elaborate as he must needs have done throughout the scenes in which Iago's wife must needs have figured: even if they could have been as dramatic, as living, as convincing as those in which the light, unprincipled, untrustworthy, loving, lying, foolish, fearless and devoted woman is made actual and tangible to our imagination as none but Shakespeare could have made her: a little afraid, it may be, of her husband, when she gives him the stolen handkerchief, but utterly dauntless when his murderous hand is lifted against

her to silence her witness to the truth.

The crowning mark of difference between such a nature as this and such a nature as that of the mistress for whose sake she lays down her life too late to save her is less obvious even in their last difference of opinion —as to whether there are or are not women who abuse their husbands as Othello charges his wife with abusing him—than in the previous scene when Emilia most naturally and inevitably asks her if he has not just shown himself to be jealous, and she answers :

Who, he ? I think the sun where he was born
Drew all such humours from him.

This would be a most noble stroke of pathos if the speaker were wrong —misled by love into loving error ; but the higher Shakespearean pathos,

unequalled and impossible for man to conceive as ever possibly to be equalled by man, consists in the fact that she was right. And the men of Shakespeare's age could see this: they coupled together with equally assured propriety and justice of epithet

Honest Iago and the jealous Moor.

The jealousy of the one and the honesty of the other must stand or fall together. Othello, when overmastered by the agony of the sudden certitude that the devotion of his love has been wasted on a harlot who has laid in ashes the honour and the happiness of his life, may naturally or rather must inevitably so bear himself as to seem jealous in the eyes of all—and they are all who know him—to whom Iago seems the living

type of honesty: a bluff, gallant, outspoken fellow, no conjurer and no saint, coarse of speech and cynical of humour, but true and tried as steel: a man to be trusted beyond many a far cleverer and many a more refined companion in peril or in peace. It is the supreme triumph of his superb hypocrisy so to disguise the pride of intellect which is the radical instinct of his nature and the central mainspring of his action as to pass for a man of rather inferior than superior intelligence to the less blunt and simple natures of those on whom he plays with a touch so unerring at the pleasure of his merciless will. One only thing he cannot do: he cannot make Desdemona doubt of Othello. The first terrible outbreak of his gathering passion in a triple

peal of thunder fails to convince her that she has erred in believing him incapable of jealousy. She can only believe that he has vented upon her the irritation aroused by others, and repent that she should have charged him even in thought with unkindness on no more serious account than this. "Nay, we must think men are not gods": and she had been but inconsiderate and over-exacting, an "unhandsome warrior" unfit to bear the burden and the heat of the day—of a lifelong union and a fellowship in battle and struggle against the trials and the tests of chance, to repine internally for a moment on such a score as that.

Were no other proof extant and flagrant of the palpable truth that Shakespeare excelled all other men of

all time on record as a poet in the most proper and literal sense—as a creator of man and woman, there would be overflowing and overwhelming proof of it in the creation and interaction of these three characters. In the more technical and lyrical sense of the word, no less than in height of prophetic power, in depth of reconciling and atoning inspiration, he is excelled by Æschylus; though surely, on the latter score, by Æschylus alone. But if the unique and marvellous power which at the close of the Oresteia leaves us impressed with a crowning and final sense of high spiritual calm and austere consolation in face of all the mystery of suffering and of sin—if this supreme gift of the imaginative reason was no more shared by Shakespeare than

by any poet or prophet or teacher of Hebrew origin, it was his and his alone to set before us the tragic problem of character and event, of all action and all passion, all evil and all good, all natural joy and sorrow and chance and change, in such fullness and perfection of variety, with such harmony and supremacy of justice and of truth, that no man known to historic record ever glorified the world whom it would have been so utterly natural and so comparatively rational to fall down before and worship as a God.

For nothing human is ever for a moment above the reach or beyond the scope or beneath the notice of his all but superhuman genius. In this very play he sets before mankind for ever not only the perfect models

of heroic love and honour, of womanly sweetness and courage, of intelligent activity and joyous energy in evil, but also an unsurpassable type of the tragicomic dullard. Roderigo is not only Iago's but (in Dryden's masterly phrase) "God Almighty's fool." And Shakespeare shows the poor devil no more mercy than Iago or than God. You see at once that he was born to be plundered, cudgelled, and killed—if he tries to play the villain—like a dog. No lighter comic relief than this rather grim and pitiless exhibition of the typic fool could have been acceptable or admissible on the stage of so supreme a tragedy.

Such humorous realism—and it is excellent of its kind—as half relieves and half intensifies the horror of Cinthio's tale may serve as well as

any other point of difference to show with what matchless tact of transfiguration by selection and rejection the hand of Shakespeare wrought his will and set his mark on the materials left ready for it by the hand of a lesser genius. The ancient waylays and maims the lieutenant on a dark night as he comes from the house of a harlot " with whom he was wont to solace himself " ; and when the news gets abroad next morning, and reaches the ears of Disdemona, " she, who was of a loving nature, and thought not that evil should thence befall her, shewed that she had right great sorrow for such a mishap. Hereof the Moor took the worst opinion that might be, and went to find the ancient, and said to him, ' Thou knowest well that my ass of a wife

is in so great trouble for the lieutenant's mishap that she is like to run mad.' 'And how could you,' said he, 'deem otherwise, seeing that he is her soul?' 'Her soul, eh?' replied the Moor. 'I will pluck—that will I—the soul from her body.'"

Shakespeare and his one disciple Webster alone could have afforded to leave this masterly bit of dialogue unused or untranslated. For they alone would so have elevated and ennobled the figure of the protagonist as to make it unimaginable that he could have talked in this tone of his wife and her supposed paramour with the living instrument of his revenge. Could he have done so, he might have been capable of playing the part played by the merciless Moor who allows the ancient to thrash her to

death with a stocking stuffed with sand. No later master of realistic fiction can presumably have surpassed the simple force of impression and effect conveyed by this direct and unlovely narrative.

"And as they debated with each other whether the lady should be done to death by poison or dagger, and resolved not on either the one or the other of these, the ancient said, 'A way there is come into my mind whereby you shall satisfy yourself, and there shall be no suspicion of it whatever. And it is this. The house wherein you dwell is very old, and the ceiling of your chamber has many chinks in it. I will that with a stocking full of sand we smite Disdemona so sore that she die thereof, whereby there may seem on her no

sign of blows: when she shall be dead, we will make part of the ceiling fall, and will shatter the lady's head; feigning that a beam as it fell has shattered it and killed her: and in this wise there shall be no one who may conceive any suspicion of you, every man believing that her death has befallen by accident.' The cruel counsel pleased the Moor, and after abiding the time that seemed convenient to him, he being one night with her abed, and having already hidden the ancient in a little chamber that opened into the bedchamber, the ancient, according to the order taken between them, made some manner of noise in the little chamber: and, hearing it, the Moor said, suddenly, to his wife, 'Hast thou heard that noise?' 'I have heard it,'

said she. 'Get up,' subjoined the Moor, 'and see what is the matter.' Up rose the hapless Disdemona, and, as soon as she came near the little chamber, forth came thereout the ancient, who, being a strong man, and of good muscle, with the stocking which he had ready gave her a cruel blow in the middle of her back, whereby the lady instantly fell, without being able well-nigh to draw breath. But with that little voice that she could get she called on the Moor to help her, and he, risen out of bed, said to her, 'Most wicked lady, thou hast the wage of thine unchastity: thus fare those women, who, feigning to love their husbands, set horns on their heads.' The wretched lady, hearing this, and feeling herself come to her end, inasmuch

as the ancient had given her another blow, said that in witness of her faith she called upon the divine justice, seeing that the world's failed her. And as she called on God to help her, when the third blow followed, she lay slain by the villainous ancient. Then, having laid her in bed, and shattered her head, he and the Moor made the rooftree of the chamber fall, as they had devised between them, and the Moor began to call for help, for the house was falling: at whose voice the neighbours came running, and having uncovered the bed, they found the lady under the roof-beams dead."

We are a long way off Shakespeare in this powerfully dramatic and realistic scene of butchery: it is a far cry from Othello, a nature made up of

love and honour, of resolute righteousness and heroic pity, to the relentless and deliberate ruffian whose justice is as brutal in its ferocity as his caution is cold-blooded in its foresight. The sacrificial murder of Desdemona is no butchery, but tragedy —terrible as ever tragedy may be, but not more terrible than beautiful; from the first kiss to the last stab, when the sacrificing priest of retribution immolates the victim whose blood he had forborne to shed for pity of her beauty till impelled to forget his first impulse and shed it for pity of her suffering. His words can bear no other meaning, can imply no other action, that would not be burlesque rather than grotesque in its horror. And the commentators or annotators who cannot understand or will not

allow that a man in almost unimaginable passion of anguish may not be perfectly and sedately mindful of consistency and master of himself must explain how Desdemona manages to regain her breath so as to speak three times, and utter the most heavenly falsehood that ever put truth to shame, after being stifled to death. To recover breath enough to speak, to think, and to lie in defence of her slayer, can hardly be less than to recover breath enough to revive and live, if undespatched by some sharper and more summary method of homicide. The fitful and intermittent lack of stage directions which has caused and perpetuated this somewhat short-sighted oversight is not a more obvious evidence of the fact that Shakespeare's text has lost more than any other

and lesser poet's for want of the author's revision than is the misplacing of a letter which, as far as I know, has never yet been set right. When Othello hears that Iago has instigated Roderigo to assåssinate Cassio, he exclaims, "O villain!" and Cassio ejaculates, "Most heathenish, and most gross!" The sense is improved and the metre is rectified when we perceive that the original printer mistook the word "villanie" for the word "villaine." Such corrections of an unrevised text may seem slight and trivial matters to Englishmen who give thanks for the like labour when lavished on second-rate or third-rate poets of classical antiquity: the toil bestowed by a Bentley or a Porson on Euripides or Horace must naturally, in the judgment of universities, seem

wasted on Shakespeare or on Shelley.

One of the very few poets to be named with these has left on everlasting record the deliberate expression of his judgment that *Othello* combines and unites the qualities of *King Lear*, "the most tremendous effort of Shakespeare as a poet" (a verdict with which I may venture to express my full and absolute agreement), and of *Hamlet*, his most tremendous effort "as a philosopher or meditator." It may be so: and Coleridge may be right in his estimate that "*Othello* is the union of the two." I should say myself, but with no thought of setting my opinion against that of the man who at his best was now and then the greatest of all poets and all critics, that the fusion

of thought and passion, inspiration and meditation, was at its height in *King Lear*. But in *Othello* we get the pure poetry of natural and personal emotion, unqualified by the righteous doubt and conscientious intelligence which instigate and impede the will and the action of Hamlet. The collision and the contrast of passion and intellect, of noble passion and infernal intellect, was never before and can never be again presented and verified as in this most tragic of all tragedies that ever the supreme student of humanity bequeathed for the study of all time. As a poet and a thinker Æschylus was the equal, if not the superior, of Shakespeare ; as a creator, a revealer, and an interpreter, infinite in his insight and his truthfulness, his tenderness and his wisdom, his

justice and his mercy, no man who ever lived can stand beside the author of *Othello*.

KING RICHARD II

KING RICHARD II

IT is a truth more curious than difficult to verify that there was a time when the greatest genius ever known among the sons of men was uncertain of the future and unsure of the task before it; when the one unequalled and unapproachable master of the one supreme art which implies and includes the mastery of the one supreme science perceptible and accessible by man stood hesitating between the impulsive instinct for dramatic poetry, the crown and consummation of all philosophies, the living incarnation of creative and intelligent godhead, and the facile seduction of elegiac and idyllic verse, of meditative and uncreative song: be-

tween the music of Orpheus and the music of Tibullus. The legendary choice of Hercules was of less moment than the actual choice of Shakespeare between the influence of Robert Greene and the influence of Christopher Marlowe.

The point of most interest in the tragedy or history of *King Richard II* is the obvious evidence which it gives of the struggle between the worse and the better genius of its author. "'Tis now full tide 'tween night and day." The author of *Selimus* and *Andronicus* is visibly contending with the author of *Faustus* and *Edward II* for the mastery of Shakespeare's poetic and dramatic adolescence. Already the bitter hatred which was soon to vent itself in the raging rancour of his dying utterance must have been

kindled in the unhappy heart of Greene by comparison of his original work with the few lines, or possibly the scene or two, in his unlovely though not unsuccessful tragedy of *Titus Andronicus*, which had been retouched or supplied by Shakespeare; whose marvellous power of transfiguration in the act of imitation was never overmatched in any early work of a Raffaelle while yet the disciple of a Perugino. There are six lines in that discomfortable play which can only have been written, if any trust may be put in the evidence of intelligent comparison, by Shakespeare; and yet they are undoubtedly in the style of Greene, who could only have written them if the spirit of Shakespeare had passed into him for five minutes or so:

King, be thy thoughts imperious, like thy name.
Is the sun dimmed that gnats do fly in it?
The eagle suffers little birds to sing,
And is not careful what they mean thereby,
Knowing that with the shadow of his wing
He can at pleasure stint their melody.

There is nothing so fine as that in the elegiac or rhyming scenes or passages of *King Richard II.* And yet it is not glaringly out of place among the *sottes monstruosités*—if I may borrow a phrase applied by Michelet to a more recent literary creation—of the crazy and chaotic tragedy in which a writer of gentle and idyllic genius attempted to play the part which his friend Marlowe and their supplanter Shakespeare were born to originate and to sustain. To use yet another and a most admirable French phrase, the author of *Titus Andronicus* is

evidently a *mouton enragé*. The mad sheep who has broken the bounds of his pastoral sheepfold has only, in his own opinion, to assume the skin of a wolf, and the tragic stage must acknowledge him as a lion.' Greene, in his best works of prose fiction and in his lyric and elegiac idyls, is as surely the purest and gentlest of writers as he was the most reckless and disreputable of men. And when ambition or hunger lured or lashed him into the alien field of tragic poetry, his first and last notion of the work in hand was simply to revel and wallow in horrors after the fashion, by no means of a wild boar, but merely of a wether gone distracted.

Nevertheless, the influence of this unlucky trespasser on tragedy is too obvious in too much of the text of

King Richard II to be either questioned or overlooked. Coleridge, whose ignorance of Shakespeare's predecessors was apparently as absolute as it is assuredly astonishing in the friend of Lamb, has attempted by super-subtle advocacy to explain and excuse, if not to justify and glorify, the crudities and incongruities of dramatic conception and poetic execution which signalize this play as unmistakably the author's first attempt at historic drama: it would perhaps be more exactly accurate to say, at dramatic history. But they are almost as evident as the equally wonderful and youthful genius of the poet. The grasp of character is uncertain: the exposition of event is inadequate. The reader or spectator unversed in the byways of history

has to guess at what has already happened—how, why, when, where, and by whom the prince whose murder is the matter in debate at the opening of the play has been murdered. He gets so little help or light from the poet that he can only guess at random, with blind assumption or purblind hesitation, what may be the right or wrong of the case which is not even set before him. The scolding-match between Bolingbroke and Mowbray, fine in their primitive way as are the last two speeches of the latter declaimer, is liker the work of a pre-Marlowite than the work of Marlowe's disciple. The whole scene is merely literary, if not purely academic: and the seemingly casual interchange of rhyme and blank verse is more wayward and fitful than even

in *Romeo and Juliet.* That the finest passage is in rhyme, and is given to a character about to vanish from the action of the play, is another sign of poetical and intellectual immaturity. The second scene has in it a breath of true passion and a touch of true pathos: but even if the subject had been more duly and definitely explained, it would still have been comparatively wanting in depth of natural passion and pungency of natural pathos. The third scene, full of beautifully fluent and plentifully inefficient writing, reveals the protagonist of the play as so pitifully mean and cruel a weakling that no future action or suffering can lift him above the level which divides and purifies pity from contempt. And this, if mortal manhood may venture

to pass judgment on immortal godhead, I must say that Shakespeare does not seem to me to have seen. The theatrical trickery which masks and reveals the callous cruelty and the heartless hypocrisy of the histrionic young tyrant is enough to remove him once for all beyond reach of manly sympathy or compassion unqualified by scorn. If we can ever be sorry for anything that befalls so vile a sample of royalty, our sorrow must be so diluted and adulterated by recollection of his wickedness and baseness that its tribute could hardly be acceptable to any but the most pitiable example or exception of mankind. But this is not enough for the relentless persistence in spiritual vivisection that seems to guide and animate the poet's manipulation and

evolution of a character which at once excites a contempt and hatred only to be superseded by the loathing and abhorrence aroused at thought of the dastardly ruffian by the deathbed of his father's noble and venerable brother. The magnificent poetry which glorifies the opening scene of the second act, however dramatically appropriate and effective in its way, is yet so exuberant in lyric and elegiac eloquence that readers or spectators may conceivably have thought the young Shakespeare less richly endowed by nature as a dramatist than as a poet. It is not of the speaker or the hearer that we think as we read the most passionate panegyric on his country ever set to hymnal harmonies by the greatest of patriotic poets but Æschylus alone:

it is simply of England and of Shakespeare.

The bitter prolongation of the play upon words which answers the half-hearted if not heartless inquiry, "How is't with aged Gaunt?" is a more dramatic touch of homelier and nearer nature to which Coleridge has done no more than exact justice in his admirable comment: "A passion there is that carries off its own excess by plays on words as naturally, and therefore as appropriately to drama, as by gesticulations, looks, or tones." And the one thoroughly noble and nobly coherent figure in the poem disappears as with a thunderclap or the sound of a trumpet calling to judgment a soul too dull in its baseness, too decrepit in its degradation, to hear or understand the summons.

Live in thy shame, but die not shame with thee !
These words hereafter thy tormentors be !

But the poor mean spirit of the hearer is too narrow and too shallow to feel the torment which a nobler soul in its adversity would have recognized by the revelation of remorse.

With the passing of John of Gaunt the moral grandeur of the poem passes finally away. Whatever of interest we may feel in any of the surviving figures is transitory, intermittent, and always qualified by a sense of ethical inconsistency and intellectual inferiority. There is not a man among them: unless it be the Bishop of Carlisle: and he does but flash across the action for an ineffectual instant. There is often something attractive in Aumerle: indeed, his dauntless and devoted affection for the king makes

us sometimes feel as though there must be something not unpitiable or unlovable in the kinsman who could inspire and retain such constancy of regard in a spirit so much manlier than his own. But the figure is too roughly and too thinly sketched to be thoroughly memorable as a man's: and his father's is an incomparable, an incredible, an unintelligible and a monstrous nullity. Coleridge's attempt to justify the ways of York to man—to any man of common sense and common sentiment—is as amusing in Coleridge as it would be amazing in any other and therefore in any lesser commentator.

In the scene at Windsor Castle between the Queen and her husband's minions the idyllic or elegiac style again supplants and supersedes the

comparatively terse and dramatic manner of dialogue between the noblemen whom we have just seen lashed into disgust and goaded into revolt by the villainy and brutality of the rascal king.' The dialogue is beautiful and fanciful: it makes a very pretty eclogue: none other among the countless writers of Elizabethan eclogues could have equalled it. But if we look for anything more or for anything higher than this, we must look elsewhere: and we shall not look in vain if we turn to the author of *Edward the Second*. When the wretched York creeps in, we have undoubtedly such a living and drivelling picture of hysterical impotence on the downward grade to dotage and distraction as none but Shakespeare could have painted. When

Bolingbroke reappears and Harry Percy appears on the stage of the poet who has bestowed on him a generous portion from the inexhaustible treasure of his own immortal life, we find ourselves again among men, and are comforted and refreshed by the change. The miserable old regent's histrionic attempt to play the king and rebuke the rebel is so admirably pitiful that his last unnatural and monstrous appearance in the action of the play might possibly be explained or excused on the score of dotage—an active and feverish fit of impassioned and demented dotage.

The inspired effeminacy and the fanciful puerility which dunces attribute to the typical character of a representative poet never found such graceful utterance as the greatest of

poets has given to the unmanliest of his creatures when Richard lands in Wales. Coleridge credits the poor wretch with "an intense love of his country," intended to "redeem him in the hearts of the audience" in spite of the fact that "even in this love there is something feminine and personal." There is nothing else in it: as anybody but Coleridge would have seen. It is exquisitely pretty and utterly unimaginable as the utterance of a man. The two men who support him on either side, the loyal priest and the gallant kinsman, offer him words of manly counsel and manful cheer. He answers them with an outbreak of such magnificent poetry as might almost have been uttered by the divine and unknown and unimaginable poet who gave to

eternity the Book of Job: but in this case also the futility of intelligence is as perfect as the sublimity of speech. And his utter collapse on the arrival of bad tidings provokes a counter-change of poetry as splendid in utterance of abjection and despair as the preceding rhapsody in expression of confidence and pride. The scene is still rather amœbæan than dramatic: it is above the reach of Euripides, but more like the imaginable work of a dramatic and tragic Theocritus than the possible work of a Sophocles when content to give us nothing more nearly perfect and more comparatively sublime than the *Trachiniæ*. And it is even more amusing than curious that the courtly censors who cancelled and suppressed the scene of Richard's deposition should not

have cut away the glorious passage in which the vanity of kingship is confronted, by the grovelling repentance of a king, with the grinning humiliation of death. The dramatic passion of this second great speech is as unmistakable as the lyric emotion of the other. And the utter collapse of heart and spirit which follows on the final stroke of bad tidings at once completes the picture of the man, and concludes in equal harmony the finest passage of the poem and the most memorable scene in the play.

The effect of the impression made by it is so elaborately sustained in the following scene as almost to make a young student wonder at the interest taken by the young Shakespeare in the development or evolution of such a womanish or semivirile character.

The style is not exactly verbose, as we can hardly deny that it is in the less passionate parts of the second and third acts of *King John:* but it is exuberant and effusive, elegiac and Ovidian, in a degree which might well have made his admirers doubt, and gravely doubt, whether the future author of *Othello* would ever be competent to take and hold his place beside the actual author of *Faustus*. Marlowe did not spend a tithe of the words or a tithe of the pains on the presentation of a character neither more worthy of contempt nor less worthy of compassion. And his Edward is at least as living and convincing, as tragic and pathetic a figure as Shakespeare's Richard.

The garden scene which closes this memorable third act is a very pretty

eclogue, not untouched with tragic rather than idyllic emotion. The fourth act opens upon a morally chaotic introduction of incongruous causes, inexplicable plaintiffs, and incomprehensible defendants. Whether Aumerle or Fitzwater or Surrey or Bagot is right or wrong, honourable or villainous, no reader or spectator is given a chance of guessing: it is a mere cockpit squabble. And the scene of deposition which follows, full as it is of graceful and beautiful writing, need only be set against the scene of deposition in *Edward the Second* to show the difference between rhetorical and dramatic poetry, emotion and passion, eloquence and tragedy, literature and life. The young Shakespeare's scene is full to superfluity of fine verses and fine passages: his

young compeer's or master's is from end to end one magnificent model of tragedy, "simple, sensuous, and passionate" as Milton himself could have desired: Milton, the second as Shakespeare was the first of the great English poets who were pupils and debtors of Christopher Marlowe. It is pure poetry and perfect drama: the fancy is finer and the action more lifelike than here. Only once or twice do we come upon such a line as this in the pathetic but exuberant garrulity of Richard: "While that my wretchedness doth bait myself." That is worthy of Marlowe. And what follows is certainly pathetic: though certainly there is a good deal of it.

The last act might rather severely than unfairly be described as a series

of six tragic or tragicomic eclogues. The first scene is so lovely that no reader worthy to enjoy it will care to ask whether it is or is not so lifelike as to convey no less of conviction than all readers must feel of fascination in the continuous and faultless melody of utterance and tenderness of fancy which make it in its way an incomparable idyl. From the dramatic point of view it might certainly be objected that we know nothing of the wife, and that what we know of the husband does not by any means tend to explain the sudden pathos and sentimental sympathy of their parting speeches. The first part of the next scene is as beautiful and blameless an example of dramatic narrative as even a Greek poet could have given at such length: but in the latter

part of it we cannot but see and acknowledge again the dramatic immaturity of the poet who in a very few years was to reveal himself as beyond all question, except from the most abject and impudent of dunces, the greatest imaginable dramatist or creator ever born into immortality. Style and metre are rough, loose, and weak: the dotage of York becomes lunacy. *Sa folie en furie est tournée.* The scene in which he clamours for the blood of his son is not in any proper sense tragic or dramatic: it is a very ugly eclogue, artificial in manner and unnatural in substance. No feebler or unlovelier example exists of those "jigging veins of rhyming mother-wits" which Marlowe's imperial rebuke should already have withered into silence on the lips of the

veriest Marsyas among all the amœbæan rhymesters of his voluble and effervescent generation.

The better nature of the young Shakespeare revives in the closing scenes: though Exton is a rather insufficient ruffian for the part of so important an assassin. We might at least have seen or heard of him before he suddenly chips the shell as a full-fledged murderer. The last soliloquy of the king is wonderful in its way, and beautiful from any point of view: it shows once more the influence of Marlowe's example in the curious trick of selection and transcription of texts for sceptic meditation and analytic dissection. But we see rather more of the poet and less of his creature the man than Marlowe might have given us. The interlude

of the groom, on the other hand, gives promise of something different in power and pathos from the poetry of Marlowe : but the scene of slaughter which follows is not quite satisfactory : it is almost boyish in its impetuosity of buffeting and bloodshed. The last scene, with its final reversion to rhyme, may be described in Richard's own previous words as good, "and yet not greatly good."

Of the three lines on which the greatest genius that ever made earth more splendid, and the name of man more glorious, than without the passage of its presence they could have been, chose alternately or successively to work, the line of tragedy was that on which its promise or assurance of future supremacy was first made manifest. The earliest comedies of Shake-

speare, overflowing with fancies and exuberant in beauties as they are, gave no sign of inimitable power: their joyous humour and their sun-bright poetry were charming rather than promising qualities. The imperfections of his first historic play, on which I trust I have not touched with any semblance of even the most unwilling or unconscious irreverence, are surely more serious, more obvious, more obtrusive, than the doubtless undeniable and indisputable imperfections of *Romeo and Juliet*. If the style of love-making in that loveliest of all youthful poems is fantastically unlike the actual courtship of modern lovers, it is not unliker than is the style of love-making in favour with Dante and his fellow-poets of juvenile and fanciful passion. Setting aside

this objection, the first of Shakespeare's tragedies is not more beautiful than blameless. There is no incoherence of character, no inconsistency of action. Aumerle is hardly so living a figure as Tybalt: Capulet is as indisputably probable as York is obviously impossible in the part of a headstrong tyrant. There is little feminine interest in the earliest comedies: there is less in the first history. In the first tragedy there is nothing else, or nothing but what is so subservient and subordinate as simply to bring it out and throw it into relief. In the work of a young poet this difference would or should be enough to establish and explain the fact that though he might be greater than all other men in history and comedy, he was still greater in tragedy.

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